

In ESSENCE

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FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

Ph.D.'s in Uniform

THE SOURCE: "Beyond the Cloister" by David H. Petraeus, and "Learning to Lose" by Ralph Peters, in *The American Interest*, July–Aug. 2007.

FOR THE LAST HALF-CENTURY, the military has been sending some of its star officers to the nation's elite civilian graduate schools to earn Ph.D.'s. The practice has produced a generation of military leaders such as General David H. Petraeus, the commanding general of the multinational force in Iraq, and much of his immediate staff. The trend riles author Ralph Peters, who says it leads to dithering and theorizing, requiring "unlearning" before a "too-cerebral officer" can become "the visceral killer any battlefield demands."

General Petraeus counters that his Princeton Ph.D. in international relations and economics has helped him broadly and practically in Iraq. It taught him, for example, that "injecting more money into an economy without increasing the amount of goods in the marketplace does nothing more than produce

inflation." Therefore, when Iraqi government employees began to get paid after the fall of Saddam Hussein, Petraeus worked to reopen the Iraq-Syria border to trade so that the inflow of money from public salaries would not simply push up prices for the few items for sale. Graduate education helped members of his command understand counterinsurgency operations—because they had written papers about lessons from Vietnam and Central America. It gave other staff tools to help a new provincial council set up small-business programs and put together investment deals.

Graduate training, Petraeus writes, blasts military officers out of their cloistered environment and comfort zone. It usually injects at least a modicum of intellectual humility—not a small thing for officers entrusted with soldiers' lives. Such "experiences are critical to the development of the flexible, adaptable, creative thinkers who are so important to operations in places like Iraq and Afghanistan," he says.

Peters, a retired Army lieutenant colonel, asserts that the Ph.D. experience destroys critical thinking and retards common sense. "Can it be coincidental, after all, that across the half-century during which the cult of higher civilian education for officers prospered, we have gone from winning wars to losing them?"

Advanced courses are necessary, but they should be in language skills, Peters argues. What the military needs is officers who can communicate directly with the other side, and think like them. "Such training goes overwhelmingly to enlisted personnel on the unspoken assumption that officers don't have time for that sort of triviality," Peters writes.

"Officers don't need to study elaborate theories of conflict resolution (none of which work, anyway). They need to know how to fight and win wars." What the military requires most is backbone and integrity, "a hallmark of good military units, but certainly not of the contemporary American campus," according to Peters.

Petraeus parries that the academic world is full of people who see the world "very differently than we do." The college campus provides excellent preparation for people who will live and work in other cultures, in uniform or not.